

Testimony of Hartford Schools Superintendent  
Dr. Steven J. Adamowski  
Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee  
February 10, 2009

Sen. Handley and Rep. Willis, Sen. Musto, Rep. Candelaria and members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today in support of House Bill 5227, An Act Allowing Towns to Create Scholarship Funds Through Municipal Bonding.

As you may know, Hartford Public Schools has embarked on a well-received reform plan to reinvent itself as an all-choice system of high-achieving schools. This transformation has two ultimate goals: to close Connecticut's largest-in-the-nation achievement gap between low-income urban students and their suburban counterparts and to prepare all city children for a four-year college education.

All of the new schools are models of teaching programs that have produced outstanding results consistently with the poorest, underperforming students.

Among our accomplishments thus far: 1) Our district scored the first increase in seven years on both the 2008 Connecticut Mastery Test and the 2008 Connecticut Academic Performance Test. 2) the increase in the percentage of students within goal range on the CMT was more than three times the state average. 3) We raised the cohort (four-year) graduation rate by seven percentage points – from 29 percent to 36 percent. 4) And we opened 11 new academies and learning centers in the first year of plan and approved five new schools for 2009-2010.

Hartford Public Schools fully anticipates showing further progress at at least the same pace when the current school year ends.

That said, Hartford is still a long way from closing the achievement gap. The district would have to repeat last year's success for about ten years in a row to truly close the achievement gap.

One of our chief obstacles is the cost of higher education – even public higher education. For many of our students, the expense is so prohibitive that it discourages them from even bothering to try to succeed. No amount of educational reform can overcome the very real perception among low-income students that college is only for those who can afford it.

If this committee approves House Bill 5227, as it did last year before the measure failed to pass in the Senate, it will be reversing that economic disincentive to achieve and turning it into an inducement – an inspiration, if you will – to better.

The fund that the bill is intended to create is modeled after a private endowment established in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 2005 that guaranteed every high school graduate who lived in the city a free college education provided he or she maintained at least a C-average while in college. Residency and a high school diploma were the only requirements.

The measure before you would allow municipalities to set up similar endowments, subject to voter approval, through the sale of bonds. Moreover, it limits this bonding capacity to those communities that really need it, distress areas like Hartford that studies show will be the source of about 40 percent of Connecticut's labor force in several years.

As happened in Kalamazoo, the effects of this bill could manifest themselves almost instantly in the form of vastly increased graduation rates, reduced drop-out rates and an increase in the numbers of students applying to and remaining in college.

What's more, the Kalamazoo Promise, as it is called, had the added consequences of reversing the city's population decline, luring new businesses and increasing home sales and property values.

If closing the achievement gap and ensuring that the state has an educated work force for the future truly matter, it is frankly difficult to see how anyone could oppose House Bill 5227.

I urge you to renew your faith in this measure and approve it once again. The lives of many of our children depend on it.

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